

**EXOTIC, DEMONIC, OR ECONOMIC: USING BLACK AFRICANS
FOR POLITICAL GAIN IN WESTERN EUROPEAN
MEDIEVAL ART, 1000-1400**

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As Debra Higgs Strickland suggests in a discussion of the representations of Jews, medieval Christian images of people of different faiths and races or ethnicities provide little enlightenment about those various types of people, but they elucidate much about medieval Christians (96). This idea is particularly relevant when considering representations of people of black African descent in Western European medieval art.¹ Such images were often ambivalent, multifarious, and changing, suggesting that the perceptions of black Africans were varied and complex. Some of the visual evidence from the years 1000 to 1400 indicates that views toward black people in medieval Western Europe were frequently artificially constructed and disseminated. I maintain that Christian artistic representations of black Africans in medieval Western Europe after the year 1000 were often active parts of an ideology that the Latin Church and European secular powers used in expanding their influence and furthering their political ambitions.

Before exploring this argument, one should consider some of the challenges in researching the representations of black people in medieval art. The first is that the modern category of "black" in the sense of a person's race or ethnicity does not have an exact parallel in the medieval world. For example, a medieval Western European probably would have thought of an individual with black skin as an Ethiopian, Moor, North African, or Berber instead of a "black." They often associated a black person with being Muslim or pagan, which adds the dimension of religious difference to the investigation of the topic. In addition, the use of the color black for people in medieval art is not always an indicator of a black-skinned person. As will be discussed in greater detail, in contrast to a medieval Christian's typical association of God and Christian virtue with the color white, black

often symbolized evil, and could be used in depicting the moral depravity of different beings, including non-black Jews or Muslims (Caviness 562, 570). Scholars have already pointed out that this matter is further complicated by the fact that specific colors tended to carry multiple meanings in the Middle Ages; in fact, the color black did not always symbolize evil (Caviness 569, Mellinkoff 1:56, Strickland 84). Also, the color black in the Middle Ages was often neither technically achievable with the pigments available to artists, nor artistically sensible in certain media, such as stained glass (Caviness 558, Strickland 83).

It is also hard to consider images of black people in medieval art without looking for racist tendencies behind their creation. As this article demonstrates, the representation of different skin colors in the Middle Ages was probably never neutral or without meaning (Hahn 6). However, contrary to some modern-day perceptions of medieval European society, the tendencies toward bigotry and intolerance regarding race and ethnicity did not necessarily exist in the manner in which these terms are thought of today and, as a result, cannot be considered as the sole concepts standing behind the representations of black Africans in medieval art. To understand this fact, it helps to consider the evolution of the words "race" and "ethnicity." The word *race* entered the English language in the sixteenth century; it has had numerous meanings and connotations, and its use today is often damaging given its vague definition (Williams 248-50). In fact, as Madeline Caviness points out, the idea that "racial identity" can be based on a set of heritable physical characteristics is a modern one (556), and, as a result, as William Chester Jordan argues, the application of the term *race* to medieval studies can cloud instead of illuminate matters (165-73).² The word *ethnic* came into the English language in the fourteenth century, derived from the Greek word *ethnikos*, or "heathen," and was "widely used in the senses of heathen, pagan or Gentile, until C19, when this sense was generally superseded by the sense of a racial characteristic" (Williams 119). Therefore, the modern-day significance of race and ethnicity did not exist during the period under discussion. Instead, as this article shows, being a "heathen," "pagan," or "barbarian," particularly a non-Western

European one, often stood prevalently behind the manner in which black Africans were represented. Religious and secular medieval powers frequently effected huge social change through their use of these words, which implied a category into which black people often fell because they were originally from regions other than Western Europe and often not Christian.

One work that supports this argument is Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350*. Bartlett's work reassesses the formulation of Latin Christendom, an area that roughly corresponds with the boundaries of Europe today. He demonstrates how, beginning around the year 1000, the combined actions of the Latin Church in Rome and of Frankish rulers led to the evolution of a collective European identity. The Roman Catholic Church achieved this, for example, through the insistence on the use of Latin as the sole liturgical language, as well as on the existence of one cultic form. The Franks did so by their acquisition of vast amounts of new territory in Western Europe upon which they imposed their culture through the institution of the feudal system.³ Given the ties between the Franks and the Roman Catholic Church—particularly in joint ventures such as the pilgrimages and the Crusades—the descriptor “Frank” became synonymous with the term *Latin*. Furthermore, *Latin* came to take on a “quasi-ethnic nuance,” as in the phrase *gens latina* and in the creation of the concept of “Christendom” (Bartlett, *Making* 19).⁴

With the emergence of the Latin or Frank identity, the image of its alter-identity was expanded and refined. One was either a Western European or an other,⁵ either a Christian or a pagan, either a civilized being or a barbarian, distinctions which have nothing to do with what one thinks of as race or ethnicity today. Therefore, Western Europe began to develop further the ideology of otherness around the year 1000. Few if any black people existed in Europe at the time, and since they failed to look or act like Western-European Christians, they clearly fell into this “other” category. As a result, I believe that the Latin Church and European rulers often intentionally advanced the development of visual representations that reinforced the idea of the

otherness of black Africans in order to secure and to expand their power.⁶

Early-medieval Europe inherited a simplified perception of the other from its ancient predecessors and combined it with early Christian thinking. Generally speaking, the pictorial code for representing otherness in antiquity involved perceiving people from distant lands and with different cultural norms as monsters. Early Greek accounts by Ctesias and Megasthenes, details from Alexander's expeditions to the east and south, and Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* all told of fabulous beings from the ends of the earth.⁷ Many scholars believe that the ancients "attached no special stigma to color" (Snowden, "Iconographical" 238) and until the end of the Roman Imperial Period in the fifth century, actual skin color was regarded merely as a varying shade among the inhabitants of the Mediterranean and the East (Devisse 9).⁸ However, while the Greeks believed Ethiopians—a term commonly used to denote black Africans in general—were virtuous and moral, the Romans began to attach negative associations with Ethiopians and other African groups as a result of their political relationships with them (Strickland 87).

Early Christians inherited this set of often divergent views of black Africans and added their own religious beliefs, passing along conflicting notions to later medieval Europe. Like the ancients, they most often identified black Africans as exotic "Ethiopians." Because Augustine included Ethiopians in his vision of Christian brotherhood, some early medieval Europeans probably would have held a positive or at least indifferent view of black people. However, most early-medieval Europeans had little or no contact with people living south of the Mediterranean, and consequently they had little if any knowledge of black Africans or of their physical appearance. They continued their ancient ancestors' tradition of depicting people living in lands unknown to them as monstrous beings found at the ends of the earth. Sometimes these creatures would be darkly colored, as seen in drawings of monstrous races in a thirteenth-century English Bestiary (fol. 70r, Douce 88, Bodleian Library, Oxford). Based on what early-medieval Europeans learned from ancient texts, they explained the existence of non-Europeans from the standpoint of the macrocosm, or the universe,

and the microcosm, or the human body; the macrocosmic approach applied climatic, environmental, and astrological theories to explain why people in different parts of the world appeared so monstrous, while the microcosmic approach used humoral theories, regional stereotypes, and physiognomic theories to explain non-European types (Hassig 25, 27; Strickland Chapter 1). Using these models, it was believed that the sun in the south had darkened black Africans' skin by pulling blood to the surface, and that extreme heat had toughened their skin and curled their hair (Hassig 27). As exemplified by Pseudo-Aristotle's science of physiognomy, the overarching explanation for these foreign traits—seen as deformations and imperfections—was that these foreigners were degenerate or fallen from grace, or that they were simply not human (Friedman 2). Consequently, black Africans—particularly “Ethiopians” as the most referenced type of black person—became associated with the demonic. However, as these examples demonstrate and as will be further investigated, while early medieval Europeans thought that people with dark skin such as black Africans represented sin allegorically, their thinking about black people socially was ambiguous (Devisse 51).

With the beginnings of the eleventh-century Frankish “aristocratic diaspora,” as Bartlett labels it, as well as with increased trade in the Mediterranean and links with Muslim Spain, Western Europeans came into contact with actual black people for the first time in several centuries.⁹ As a result, the representation of black Africans began to evolve. In some cases Europeans depicted them with physical accuracy, although with a touch of exoticism, perhaps revealing a sense of curiosity or wonder (Figure 1: *Ethiopian fighting a dragon*, fol. 67v., vol. II, *Expositio in epistolas Pauli*, MS lat. 11576, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1164). In addition, the first Crusades, pilgrimages, and missionary trips brought increasing numbers of Latin Christians into contact with black Africans, many of whom were Muslim. This exposure produced a range of impacts. Black Muslims had been common in the Iberian Peninsula, southern Italy, and Sicily since the Muslim domination of those areas. After the Norman conquest of southern Italy and Sicily, black people remained in these territories, sometimes as slaves, and they often appeared in local art. These

representations sometimes carried a sense of black people's subservience to Western Christians, as seen in the late-eleventh-century carved stone throne of Bishop Elia in San Nicola, Bari, where black slaves support the bishop's seat. Paul Kaplan interprets this use of black slaves as suggesting a sort of ideological Christian victory over the "spiritually demonic," with the black men representing Islam (*Ruler* 16).

Medieval European art often represented non-Christian black people negatively through the representation of their physical attributes or through the context in which they were depicted. The Franks tended to look upon black Africans unfavorably as a result of their encounters with them in Muslim armies. Crusaders often saw black Africans as "embodying the essence of infidelity through their unfamiliar physiognomy" (Kaplan, *Ruler* 19). As a result, medieval art often depicted black people with exaggerated or grotesque physical features. For example, a late-thirteenth-century fresco in La Tour Fernande in Pernes, Provence, which was commissioned by an Angevin baron, shows an image of Ysore—a legendary black giant who threatened Paris but was fought back by Charlemagne's brother William of Orange—with fierce eyes and an enlarged nose and mouth. *Chansons de geste* possibly served as one of the sources for such imagery of black Muslims as ugly and as large in size and strength (Strickland 173). In the *Chanson* of Gaufrey de Doon de Mayence, the head of the Saracen army is described as fourteen feet tall, and with skin as black as a mulberry tree, eyes as red as glowing coal, and hair as spiky as thorns (Flühler-Kreis 154). Black men often appeared as executioners or torturers with exaggerated features in Passion scenes or in other violent situations such as the Judgment of Solomon or the Stoning of Saint Stephen, as seen in the circa-1300 Parisian *Le Livre d'Images de Madame Marie* (fol. 76r, MS Nouv.acq.fr 16251, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). Its black executioner is also wearing a parti-colored garment, a type of clothing commonly used to denigrate the person wearing it (Mellinkoff 1: 230). Other forms of dress suggesting black otherness included the headband called a *tortil*, as Ysore in Pernes wears, which would have implied that he was Muslim and emphasized his origin from an exotic, unknown land. One final example of a

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negative portrayal of a black person is found in a fifteenth-century Bavarian manuscript; it depicts an "Ethiopian"—presumably a pagan—alongside a Saracen and a Jew worshipping the Antichrist (fol. 4, *Antichrist*, MS germ.f.733, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, c. 1440-50).

In contrast with these types of images, the Hohenstaufen, as the inheritors of the Southern Italian kingdom, typically represented black Africans in a relatively positive fashion. Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily and Southern Italy in the thirteenth century, interacted daily with Muslims, many of whom were black-skinned. Frederick saw his Muslim subjects as important economic assets—as an invaluable labor force—and he appreciated Muslim scholarship and arts. Given earlier Hohenstaufen notions of universal imperial rule (Kaplan, *Ruler* 28), he allowed these others to remain in his kingdom, although some Muslims in Sicily resisted him. To control these primarily black Muslim hostile forces, he resettled them in Lucera, Apulia, allowing them to continue practicing Islam and to lead and manage themselves. As a result, they became great supporters of Frederick, providing him with a prized military unit that helped him bring other Muslim populations within his empire under control. Some Muslims even worked directly for the emperor, such as Johannes Maurus, who became Frederick's chamberlain in 1239.

Kaplan links the positive attitudes toward black people during Frederick's reign to two subsequent European artistic developments. The first one involves the appearance of black attendants in Tuscan scenes of the *Adoration of the Magi*. Their earliest identified appearance occurs on Nicola Pisano's pulpit of 1265-68 in the Siena Duomo. Kaplan attributes the black men's presence to the fact that Siena during this time was Ghibelline and these attendants would have referred to the Hohenstaufen Empire ("Black Africans" 33; *Ruler* 34). Given the prominence of black attendants within the Hohenstaufen cortege and their role of suggesting the universality of the Hohenstaufen Empire, they became fashionable in the circles of subsequent European rulers and commonly displayed in images of their courts (Kaplan, "Black Africans" 34). The gradual exposure to black people with elevated status also led medieval Europeans to begin to respect black knights as their peers (Suckale-Redlefsen 23), and led to

the appearance of black men on medieval coats of arms or crests, such as on the late fifteenth-century armorial of Conrad Grünenberg (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich). This imagery first appeared as a Hohenstaufen-inspired symbol of broad geographic holdings, later as simply a sign of prestige.

In addition, the elevated status of black people in the Southern Italian Kingdom possibly stands behind the later medieval representation of St. Maurice as black-skinned. The perception of him as a black person probably developed because the third-century martyr was from Thebes, Egypt, and, although earlier images and texts never refer to him as black-skinned, his name Maurice suggests a connection with Mauritania, the land of the Moors (Suckale-Redlefsen 53). Maurice was a highly-venerated saint in German lands by the tenth century. Eventually, Frederick's father Henry II made him the patron saint of the empire (Figure 2: *St. Maurice*, Madgeburg Cathedral, Madgeburg, 1240-50). However, his appearance as a black person occurred only in geographical areas under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire. Kaplan suggests that Frederick may have encouraged the darkening of the saint to reflect his relationship with the Luceran population, as well as to provide a model for the conversion of "heathens" to Christianity (*Ruler* 31), although Gude Suckale-Redlefsen attributes the coloration to a progressive archbishop, Albert II of Madgeburg, who was pushing the boundaries of his territories at the time (55). Regardless of the originator of this type of imagery, Maurice would have been an appealing saint during the empire's drive to occupy territories to the east and subsequent efforts to convert pagan populations.

Such relatively positive representations of black Africans continued in some cases throughout the rest of Europe. Just as Maurice came to symbolize both the universality of the Holy Roman Empire and of Christianity (Flühler-Kreis 152), other images of black people came to serve a similar purpose as well. The appearance of black attendants in the entourage of the Magi transformed around the mid-fourteenth century into the depiction of either Magus Gaspar or Magus Balthasar as black-skinned and coming from either Africa or India.¹⁰ This representation remained a common and popular image throughout the

rest of the Middle Ages, reinforcing the idea of the inclusiveness of Christianity. Although medieval Europe knew that the Queen of Sheba was black-skinned, it struggled with how black to depict her given her symbolic significance as a voluntary convert to Christianity and as a foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary. In earlier periods, she was represented as fair-skinned with a black entourage, as found in a twelfth-century stained glass window from Canterbury Cathedral that depicts Solomon and Sheba.¹¹ Sometimes she had mixed features, such as dark skin and light-colored hair (Figure 3: *Queen of Sheba*, fol. 122r., *Bellifortis*, 2 Cod. Ms. philos. 63 Cim., SUB Göttingen, Göttingen, before 1405). In these cases, physical characteristics such as light-colored skin or blond hair represented the European stereotype of queenly traits, the "badge[s] of a social class" (David 80), while the dark skin could symbolize her "heathen" beliefs and practices (Caviness 560). Meanwhile, as can be seen in a detail from the fifteenth-century *Catalan World Map* from the Biblioteca Estense in Modena, the king Prester John, considered a descendant of the three Magi, was often portrayed as a black man because he was associated with either East Africa or India. Europeans saw Prester John as their partner against the Antichrist of Islam (Suckale-Redtefsen 23). However, although literature refers to Prester John as a black man, he was depicted sometimes as fair-skinned, just as Sheba was. Clearly it was difficult for medieval Europeans to envision royal and Christian figures as solely black-skinned.

As the analysis of these regal images implies, medieval Western Europeans often saw black people as needing to be liberated either from the Muslim religion or from what they considered to be the exotic, pagan, barbaric ways of Africa. Western Europeans believed it was their duty to save these "heathens" by converting them to Christianity, as suggested in fragments from the carved tympanum of the central portal of the west façade of Notre Dame, Paris—now in the Musée national du Moyen Age, Paris—dating to 1220-30. These remnants indicate that a black captive, identifiable through the natural depiction of his physical features, stands in a group of those whom Christ resurrects. Another example of Western Europe's desire to convert non-Christian black people may lie in the existence of black medieval

Madonna statues, or Thrones of Wisdom, common in Southern Europe; Caviness suggests that this region produced them in order to aid in converting local black populations to Christianity (568).

The origins of the depictions of black Africans presented thus far suggest that the Franks tended to represent them more negatively than other European leaders, and it is worth noting that such negative perceptions of black people sometimes had more to do with the Franks' struggle for power within Europe than they did with the fight against the "infidels" of the Muslim world. For example, Charles of Anjou led forces against the Hohenstaufens in an attempt to secure his power as emperor and to partner with the French pope Urban IV between 1266 and 1268 (Barber 111). Subsequently, the Angevins treated the inhabitants at Lucera badly, destroying the colony after the year 1300 and enslaving its inhabitants (Kaplan, *Ruler* 33). In fact, because the image of Ysore in Pernes appears next to a scene representing the Angevin victory over Manfred, Kaplan suggests that Ysore correlated with the Muslim Lucerans ("Black Africans" 33-34; *Ruler* 32).

Therefore, it appears that black Africans could be represented generally in one of two ways. First, they could be seen as spiritually demonic outsiders to Christian Western Europe because they were "heathens"—Muslims or otherwise. Second, they could be perceived as members or supporters of the European empire. Non-Christian black people were considered more easily converted to Christianity than Jews (Camille 164), a perception that perhaps explains why medieval Europe represented them generally with less animosity and more diversity than Jews. I believe that the variances in representations of black Africans in medieval Western Europe often depended on the political needs of the patron behind the art. In such cases, black people were depicted positively or negatively depending on what message the sponsor wanted to impart. Strickland argues that European missionaries or crusaders would have easily understood the connection between negative images of black men in such roles as executioners or torturers, particularly in Passion scenes, and black Muslims or Africans (83); she also argues that such portrayals of black people, along with negative depictions of different others such as Jews, served as tangible examples of Christianity's apocalyptic, eschatological enemies (chapter 5). One

can see how either missionaries or crusaders, or their sponsors in the form of church leaders and kings, could have commissioned such images to galvanize support for their goals.

One final example supporting the idea that political and religious ambitions often drove the manner in which black Africans were portrayed in medieval European art involves a comparison of two illustrated manuscripts commissioned by Alfonso the Wise, King of Castile and León in the thirteenth century. Alfonso sponsored the creation of the *Libro de Ajedrez, Dados y Tablas*, which explains the history and rules behind games such as chess, dice, and backgammon. It contains a series of illustrations of the diversity of people living in Spain at the time. Different races and ethnicities are clearly delineated in scenes of black people, Christians, Jews, and Muslims playing board games (Figure 4: *Black Moors playing chess*, fol. 22r, and Figure 5: *Christians and Jews playing a board game*, fol. 71v., *Libro de Ajedrez, Dados y Tablas de Alfonso X el Sabio*, Biblioteca de El Escorial, Madrid, 1283). The black people are distinguished from Spanish Christians and Jews by dress, and physiognomic features are depicted neutrally. Even upper-class black people are distinguished from their white and black servants by headdress; nobles wear turbans while servants wear headcloths or are bareheaded. Given the subject matter of the book, it can be assumed that it reached a sophisticated, educated upper-class audience. These images may lead one to think that Alfonso the Wise valued the diversity of his kingdom and meant such images to help in fostering a tolerant society. However, a look at a copy of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (1250-1300), now in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, suggests the opposite. Alfonso was known to be extremely proud of this manuscript, a songbook of Marian lyrics and contemporary narrative miracles, which he commissioned. He probably not only displayed it to the general public but also had the *Cantigas* performed publicly (Katz and Kellar 11). With its portrayal of black Africans in negative ways, such as a black Moor being burned to death after having been tricked into bed with a white woman (Cantiga 50), or menacing black soldiers in Muslim armies (Cantiga 63), it could have incited the population to convert, persecute, or go on crusade against black people. Therefore, in these two manuscripts one

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sees different viewpoints of race and ethnicity projected to the upper and lower classes of Alfonso's kingdom. Alfonso's reasons for doing so could have been either to reinforce an image required by the Church or to strengthen control of his kingdom himself. Either way, the selection seems conscious and intentional.

This review of the representations of black Africans in medieval art after the year 1000 proposes that the construction of such images was often the product of the power struggles and expansionist goals of Latin Christendom. Although many Europeans were probably unaware of the exploitative aspects of representations of black people, it is likely that educated religious figures and powerful secular leaders consciously constructed these depictions to facilitate the attainment of their goals. This argument is supported by the fact that images of black Africans throughout medieval Europe often ranged from positive to negative depending on the political value of black people in the area in which such representations were produced. In both negative and positive images, black Africans were almost always portrayed as exotic beings based on their origins in a distant land and their skin color. Perhaps this diversity in representation reflects a conflicted sentiment, conscious or unconscious, of a society that was both fascinated and frightened of a type of people different from themselves.

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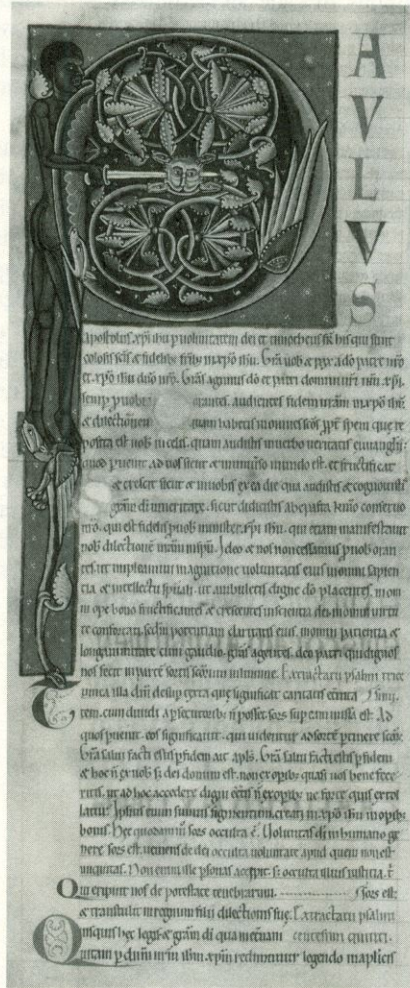


Figure 1

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Figure 2

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Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Notes

A version of this article was presented on May 5, 2006, during the MAM session "Moors, Ethiopians, and Pibald Sons: Perceptions of Africa and Africans in Medieval Europe" at the 41st International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI.

¹ Throughout this article, the term "black African(s)" will be used to refer to black-skinned people of the Middle Ages. This term is somewhat problematic as technically some black-skinned people in Europe during this period could have been born in Europe or elsewhere, and illustrates some of the difficulties involved in finding accurate terminology for use in the discourse of race and ethnicity in the Middle Ages. In the absence of an alternative, I maintain that this term is the most appropriate of those available at this time.

² Jordan suggests that perhaps the closest one comes to finding racism in the modern-day sense during the Middle Ages occurred when "invariable stereotypes" of a group in general appeared (166), and prefers the use of the term "ethnic identity" in such discussions since it serves as a more fluid label and, therefore, as a more appropriate medieval term than race (168).

³ Bartlett believes that German rulers during this period were not as influential on the development of a collective European identity as Frankish ones. He argues this because Frankish rulers established new kingdoms in non-Christian areas, while German ones typically absorbed already existing kingdoms or Christian polities into their own territories (*Making* 42).

⁴ In his article, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," Bartlett further explores the meaning of race and ethnicity in the Middle Ages. He argues that the terms in this context are interchangeable and cites Regino of Prüm's (d. 915) definition of *nationes* to support his argument. Regino states that the four typical criteria in determining *nationes* were "descent, customs, language and law," only one of which is biological (42, 47).

⁵ Edward Said coined the term "other" in *Orientalism*; in this work, he argues that nineteenth-century Western scholars developed the concept of the Orient or the Oriental as the other for the purpose of creating a mirror image of what was inferior or alien to the West.

⁶ Although it is outside the scope of this article, I also believe that medieval rulers used representations of Jews and Muslims as others to achieve these goals.

⁷ John Block Friedman argues that, although some of these beings were pure imaginative invention, others may have been based on existing people; for example, the Pygmies were probably aboriginal peoples, and the Amazons, members of matriarchal societies (24).

⁸ See also Frank M. Snowden's seminal work on this topic: *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*.

⁹ Most Europeans would have known black Africans only as imported slaves, which were most commonly employed as domestics in private houses in Mediterranean-bordering countries after the conquest of Muslim Spain during the period under discussion (Verlinden 268).

¹⁰ India was another region where medieval Europeans would have envisioned black or dark inhabitants. Furthermore, in their fantastical view of distant lands, medieval Western Europeans actually considered Ethiopia to be one of three "Indias" (Strickland 86).

¹¹ Contrary to traditional analyses describing the Canterbury Sheba's face as white, Caviness points out that it was originally painted on amethyst glass, which with discoloration over time has caused her to appear white. Instead, the faces of her camel drivers were painted brown (558).

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